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## Interpretation of בָּרַע in Exodus xxxii. 22.

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SEVERAL years ago a colleague suggested to me that בָּרַע in Ex. 32<sup>22</sup> has the same meaning as בָּרַע in Ex. 5<sup>19</sup>; that is, that Aaron meant to say that the Israelites were 'in evil case,' in distressful circumstances, and not that they were 'set on mischief.'

In *Exodus und Javiticus* Dillmann considers the possibility of such an interpretation, but dismisses it with the remark: "Aaron erinnert zu seiner Entschuldigung, Mose kenne ja das Volk, dass es בָּרַע *im Argen*, d.h., in Verderbtheit und Schlechtigkeit stecke, damit behaftet sei, vgl. V. 9, also בָּרַע etwas anders als 5, 19 bei E."

That the usual translation is not altogether satisfactory is evidenced by Knobel's emendation of the text on the basis of the Samaritan version, which reads בָּרַע instead of בָּרַע. This is a happy reading, and only needs more external evidence to give it acceptance; but lacking such evidence the exegete must interpret בָּרַע, not פָּרַע.

Is the rendering 'in evil case' defensible? There is no question that lexically the word רַע has the meaning of distress, plight, evil condition. It may possibly have that sense here. There is no difficulty syntactically either. The subject of the object clause is the word עַם, which has been attracted into the governing clause as object. So that Aaron did not mean to say that Moses knew the people, and therefore knew that they were disposed to do evil deeds, but that Moses knew that the people were 'in evil.' This construction is frequent, e.g. Ex. 2<sup>2</sup>, וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי־טוֹב הוּא; Gen. 1<sup>4</sup>, וַיֵּרָא מִן־הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם כִּי־טוֹב; Gen. 49<sup>15</sup>, וַיֵּרָא מִנְהָה כִּי טוֹב.

Since there is no difficulty either lexically or syntactically, does the context favor 'in evil case,' or 'set on mischief'? The Israelites were sensuous and had to have visible objects of reverence. They must see their god, either in the person of a human leader, or in an image representing deity. If the leader and the image were both absent, the people thought they were without divine guidance.

Moses forbade images of Jehovah, and the people obeyed as long as he was with them, for he had done all that a god could do. They believed in Jehovah because they believed in Moses, and they believed in Moses because he had successfully brought them out of bondage. In popular conception, then, Jehovah was present because Moses was present ; but Moses absent, and they are without divine leadership. In their perplexity and fear they think of the natural alternative, viz. an image of Jehovah ; for in this way only could their god be present to assist. This is exactly what Aaron said : Thou knowest that the people were in distress of mind, for thou, that broughtest them out of the land of Egypt, hadst gone, and they were leaderless. In their unwonted situation they demanded a guide, a protector, a conqueror, a god ; and I made a visible representation of Jehovah to take thy place, and bade them worship it as the god that led them out of Egypt.

Aaron is not excusing himself, nor blaming the people for immoral conduct ; but is calling Moses' attention to the obvious fact that the Israelites were "in evil case," having no visible leader.

At this period of Israel's history their fundamental error was not so much moral as intellectual inability to appreciate the spirituality of Jehovah.